

Testimony of
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On Behalf of the American Tree Farm System
Before
The Subcommittee on
Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry
Committee on Agriculture
U.S. House of Representatives

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I'd like to begin with a quote from a famous American: Kermit the Frog. When he said it isn't easy being green – he could have been talking about people like me.

I'm one of 65,000 members of the American Tree Farm System. We're all different. Some of us are teachers, doctors, truck drivers, policemen, lawyers, judges, governors, senators, and members of this House. Some are rock and roll musicians, like me.

But in one important way, we're all the same.

What brings us together is a commitment to sustainable forestry. Each of us has pledged that we'll manage our forest lands for water quality, soil conservation, wildlife habitat, recreation – not just timber. We do this because we believe that healthy, thriving forests are important for our families, for our neighbors and our communities – and most importantly, for our kids and their kids too. We preach what we practice. One of the most gratifying sights to me is seeing the Tree Farm sign appear on my neighbors' land. They've watched what my wife Rose Lane and I have done on our Tree Farm, and they've begun to do it, too.

Tree Farmers own tracts that total about 26 million acres – some of the most beautiful, diverse and sustainably managed forest land in the US. Most of us own less than 100 acres. We are represented in virtually every state and forested county. [See Appendix A]

That's the good news. There's plenty of excellent sustainable forestry being practiced by members of the American Tree Farm System and by other outstanding woodland stewards.

So what's the bad news? Why isn't it easy for Certified Tree Farmers to be "green?" Just as important, what will it take for all 10 million forest owners to be "green" like us?

The answers to these questions are complicated. From my perspective, there are four important reasons.

- First, some kinds of investments are rewarded by existing government programs and policies. Unfortunately, investing in forests isn't near the top of that list.
- Second, most of the 10 million forest owners in the US [as many as 90 percent] either don't consult a professional before they harvest trees, don't know where to find forestry

assistance – or, most troubling, don't even know they should ask for it. Frankly, many forest owners don't know what they don't know. They don't think ahead and plan for the future of their forests. And that's the cornerstone of sustainability.

- Third, the Federal programs and incentives provided for forest owners are meager, fragmented and often delivered in a way that limits the number of forest owners they can serve. Many of the conservation programs already in place do not place a high enough priority on conserving and sustaining forests.

The lines to get access to these incentives are long – too long – and forest owners are almost always stuck at the back. They rarely make it to the front.

- Fourth, while forest owners produce a lot, they don't necessarily get much for it. What products do we produce? Wood for houses and books is one, of course. But also clean water, storm water protection, carbon storage, clean air, plant and wildlife habitat, recreation and – increasingly important, green space that can provide relief from crowded cities. These are vital public goods, but right now most owners don't have an income stream to support them.

We're asked to do more and more through Federal and state mandates. However much we might want to do it, if forestry becomes too expensive, saying yes to a developer may be our only, viable choice. Investing in trees is long-term, risky and, when you consider that many of us have to wait between 10 and 40 years to get a check if we get one at all, not all that profitable.

We believe the upcoming Farm Bill provides Congress with an opportunity to address these problems, and that the solutions are within your grasp. On behalf of the 65,000 members of the American Tree Farm System we urge you to consider the following proposals:

1. Blend the Forestry Incentives Program and the Stewardship Incentives Program into a single program, the Sustainable Forestry Incentives Program.

The aim of this new program will be to provide Federal funding that supports conservation practices on private, non-industrial forests. We believe that the range of practices should be broad, and that Congress should consider mechanisms that reward owners who have already invested large sums of money, time and energy in implementing them.

Because forests and forestry differ so much from state to state, we believe that the program decisions should be made at the state level. State stewardship committees which are broadly representative of all stakeholders, including forest landowners, should determine what practices are eligible; the state forestry agency should implement the program.

Enacting this new incentive program will meet two of our most critical goals: making it easier for forest owners to gain access to programs that support sustainability and forest conservation, and insuring that administrative costs are held to the minimum necessary – putting public funds to work on the ground, not back at the office.

We support mandatory funding for this program at \$150 million.

2. Create a new program called the Sustainable Forestry Outreach Initiative.

Most landowners don't know what they can accomplish through better forestry. They don't know what's possible, or where to turn to get the professional advice that can make it happen.

The consequences for them and their forests are enormous. Without good planning, owners can get short-changed on the income from a timber harvest. They can neglect easy steps that will protect wildlife and water quality and insure the future health of their woodlands.

We believe that Congress should enact within the Farm Bill a Sustainable Forestry Outreach Initiative that coordinates and strengthens both public and private sector efforts to get forest owners on the path toward sustainability.

An important part of that effort will be facilitating contact between forest owners who are already managing their forests sustainably, and those who are not. Our sixty years of experience with the American Tree Farm System affirms that this kind of peer-to-peer contact is a powerful catalyst for promoting sustainability. People see what you do, and what you get out of it, and they want to do it too.

We recommend an authorization of \$45 million a year to support this Initiative.

3. Strengthen and sharpen the focus of existing conservation programs.

As a landowner myself, I see first hand which programs work well and which could work better in getting more people like me to do more to sustain their forests. Specifically, we recommend:

- The Forest Stewardship Program should be authorized and funded at a higher level. It should be aimed at two main goals: building capacity at the state and local level to assist forest owners; and allowing these agencies to deliver technical assistance that will help meet all the various Federal mandates that are laid on us – for water quality, wetlands, species conservation, and all the rest.
- There's an alphabet soup of other Farm Bill programs that could get more owners practicing sustainable forestry: Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Program, the Conservation Reserve Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. That's WHIP, EQUIP, CRP and CREP.

All of these programs could be strengthened by making sustainable forestry a priority objective for each of them. And if there's a way to help forest owners navigate the maze – perhaps through some form of state-level one-stop shopping – we urge you to consider it. Remember, most forest landowners aren't farmers, though they do produce a crop. And many of them, like me, aren't certain where to turn to get the help we need.

I've just written a book about how Rose Lane and I become involved in forestry and what it means to us. We named it *Forever Green*, like our philosophy of conservation. And from

everything we've learned, I believe we're at a critical turning point in the history of our nation's forests to keep them "forever green."

Here's what we know about the future:

- We know that most forests will be owned by families and individuals like me – more than 10 million of them. Right now, we own about half of all the nation's forests.
- We know that this number will grow, because our median age is high. Over 90 million acres of family forestland is owned by folks who are over 65.
- We know that forest tracts are going to get smaller, and more fragmented – and more susceptible to development. Between 1953 and now, the average size of a family woodlot decreased from 45 acres to less than 20. Without an adequate income stream to support your investment in trees, selling out can become a financial necessity – not an option.
- We know smaller tracts and uncertain income from forestry could mean more loss of forested acres, as developers build for a growing population. Between 1850 and 1983, New Hampshire's forest lost 33.25% of its forested area.